[Additional Personal History of Steve Comeau]

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1

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ADDITIONAL PERSONAL HISTORY OF STEVE COMEAU,

FRENCH CANADIAN Steve Comeau,

According to my notes Comeau said he left Canada in 1896, went to Greenville and worked there in a saw mill for six months. He then went to Waterville where he worked for

one and a half years in a woolen mill. That brought it up to 1898. Comeau was 20 years old when he left home. For the next two years he said he “alternated between Waterville and Greenville,” that is he worked in the mill in Waterville during [1899?] and 1900 except for periods in the winter time that he spent in the woods “around Greenville.” He came to Old Town in 1901, when he was 25 years old and has been here ever since. He worked in a woolen mill here as a weaver during 1901 and until 1906. From that year until 1910 he worked in Jordan's box mill. He went back as a weaver in the woolen mill next and worked there until 1912 when he went to work as an edger in Wing and Engle's box mill. He stayed there until 1917 when he went back to work in the woolen mill. Remained there as a night weaver until 1936 when the mill closed. Hasn't worked anywhere since, but would like to get a WPA job to last “until I can get a pension.” (That would be in [about?] three years.) Comeau worked for about three months in the yard at the Great Works pulp mill during or around 1916.

1

PERSONAL HISTORY OF STEVE COMEAU, FRENCH CANADIAN

Steve Comeau, French Canadian, was born in South River, New Brunswick in 1876. He is 62 years old. When he was very young his father moved to Kouchidoudouc, which is also in New Brunswick. With the exception of some time spent in night school in Old Town, all of Steve's schooling was obtained in the town with the Indian name. There was only one room in that school and there were no grades. Steve went till he was about eleven or twelve. He left Kouchidoudouc in 1896 when he was twenty years old and went to Greenville, Maine. After staying there for six months he went to Waterville where he worked in a saw mill. For the next few years he worked in the woods near Greenville in the winter, and in Waterville in the summer. In 1901 when he was twenty-five years old he came to Old Town and has been here ever since. His wife was born in the same town that Jo Goodwin came from, Petit Rocher. He has three boys and four girls. Two of the boys

and two of the girls are married. The youngest girl is taking a commercial course in the high school.

2

He worked in the woods and on the drive when he was a young man, and in saw mills, the box mills, woolen mills, and pulp mills in later life. He has been unable to get work since the woolen mill shut down several years ago. He is a Catholic and belongs to no lodges. Interest in his home and friends. Is of medium height. Has black hair, slightly gray, parted in the middle. Wears gold rimmed spectacles and is never without a pipe. Had all his teeth pulled a few-years ago but the loss doesn't show up much. Has a very pleasant manner and was always well liked by his fellow workers. Lost his home through foreclosure several years ago. Is well read and has decided opinions. Ought to tell a more virile story than any of the others I've seen so far.

1

R. F. Grady

80 Brunswick St.

Old Town, Maine

December 26, 1938

Extra Comment Regarding

French Canadians in Maine

A study of French Canadians in the eastern part of Maine, at least, can not be regarded in the same light as a study of an alien racial group that has occupied a part of a territory largely inhabited by Americans, or dominated by groups of other nationalities. I don't think that the French in Canada regard eastern Maine exactly as they would foreign soil. There are a number of reasons why this should be so. Many of the early explorers

who sailed from the old world and travelled through this region, and many of the early pioneers who settled here were French. This section once formed a part of the province of Acadia, and for long periods it was owned and controlled by Frenchmen. French Jesuits played a prominent part in the early religious life of the inhabitants, and in many communities scarcely any language but French was spoken. Even today same villages are predominantly French, and French Canadians and French Americans form a varying proportion of the population of every town.

In those early times there were many French in Canada, but there were also many in eastern Maine. Part of the time there was no boundary line between the two lands. The French here “grew up with the land.” They fought in the Revolutionary War and in the War of 1812. Maine first belonged to the Indians, and when America established its independence, the French in Maine did not feel as thought they belonged to an alien race.

The ties between the French peoples in eastern Maine and Canada were further strenghtened by relationship and marriage.

2

R.F. Grady

80 Brunswick St.,

Old Town, Maine

December 26, 1938

When the province of Acadia existed, a Frenchman who crossed the St. Croix was not going into foreign territory, but was merely travelling about in a French possession. The French have never lost the feeling that they belong here, and have as much right to be here as any one. They look, dress, and talk exactly as do the Yankees. A French Canadian may sometimes be distinguished by his speech or his accent, but the type

which used such expressions as “By gar, she's col’ won, I tell you those!” has largely disappeared from this section. It has evaporated as completely as the Irishman who used to say, “Faith an' Bejabbers, I don't like it at all, at all, so I don't, begorra!

.....

Some of the people I questioned seemed to be suspicious in spite of explanations in regard to the purpose of the work. They seemed to feel that the government had some hidden reason for wanting information about them. Maybe some of them objected to being considered as a “race apart”, and preferred to be regarded as “just folks”. A better atmosphere seemed to prevail when I left the French Canadian part out and told them I was looking up information for a book that would deal with life in Canada and Maine during a certain period. Just as much - and maybe more - information was forthcoming.

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Steve Comeau lives at 15 Prentis Street. He hasn't worked anywhere since the woolen mill shut down about two years ago.

3

R.F. Grady

80 Brunswick St.

Old Town, Maine

December 26, 1938

Has been trying to get a WPA job for a long time, but said they wouldn't put him on because his boy gets more than $14. a week in a plumbing shop. All the information I got from Steve was obtained before I told him it was for the WPA. He said if they couldn't give him a job he couldn't be expected to help them.

1

THE LIFE OF STEVE COMEAU, FRENCH CANADIAN

(As Told By Himself to Robert F. Grady)

I was born in Kouchidoudouc, in 1876. That would make me sixty two years old. That was just a little settlement - maybe two hundred people lived there. My father owned a farm of about 150 acres. Most of the people there owned farms, and they run from 50 to 200 acres. Some of the folks up that way run trap lines, and some of them worked in the woods in the winter and on the drives in the spring. It was pretty much the same up there then as it was in Maine about that time. Some times people up there would go across the line to work in the Maine woods in the winter, and go back to work their farms in the spring. There was practically no business or industry of any kind in the place I was brought up in. It was just a village of farms. There was a small Catholic church there. All the folks were French Catholics.

2

The school I went to had only one room and one teacher. I guess they had a grade system in the bigger places about like they have here. They always called the high schools “academies.” I started going to school when I was about five or six and kept it up until I was twelve years old. I never had to carry any lunch because our farm was only about fifteen minutes walk from the school. The teacher was always a girl that boarded at one of the farmhouses. A few of the pupils that lived farther out had to carry lunches. I can't remember exactly what they had, but I imagine it, was something like a couple of sandwiches made of home made bread and some fish, meat, or cottage cheese. It wouldn't always be the same, of course. They might have cake, cookies, or a doughnut to add to that. There were a lot of things they could carry such as a tomato, a piece of pie, or an apple. They carried tea or milk to drink and unless there was a fire in the stove they had to drink it cold for nobody had any vacuum bottles then.

Living conditions up there when I was a boy were a lot different than they are now. Of course I'm talking about the small villages like the one I lived in. They didn't have any telephones, bathtubs, washing machines, electric lights, radios, or a lot of things people think they have to have today. We used to have dances and parties, but nobody ever thought of a moving picture show then. I think, though, we enjoyed ourselves just as much as people do now.

3

The fuel was always wood and there wasn't anything automatic about it. Some people had a pump in the kitchen, but usually it was out in the yard. Instead of raising just one crop the farmers went in for general farming. They raised about what they needed and although they generally had plenty to eat, they never had much money. There were no labor saving machines on the farms up there then. Nobody sprayed apple trees, and grain was threshed on the barn floors. I don't think farmers worked any harder then than they do now. If you have tractors or machines that do the work faster, you simply go in for farming on a larger scale, so you keep busy anyway. The trouble with farmers nowadays is that they want to get a living without doing any work. If they'd work as long as people do in the factories they wouldn't be so hard up. When I was a boy on a farm in Canada I helped as much as I could with the work. Same of the farmers raised flax. The women would spin it into yarn and weave the yarn on hand looms into homespun cloth that was used in suits and overcoats. Winter stockings, winter caps, and mittens were always knit. We always kept enough sheep to provide wool.

3a

I couldn't say much about the cost of living in Canada when I was young. About all we had to raise money for was shoes and clothing that we couldn't make, certain kinds of foods that we couldn't raise, and maybe a doctor's bill if we got sick. A lot of farmers had home remedies that were made from herbs, to use for minor ailments. We never had to get money to pay light bills, water rates, fuel bills, etc. We could generally raise or grow enough extra to pay for what we couldn't produce. The more a farmer can raise the better

off he is, for he has to sell his stuff at a wholesale price, and he has to pay a retail price for what he buy. Sometimes when a couple of the young folks got married a lot of the people would get together and help build a home for them. The roads were alwas pretty bad in the spring, but they were all right at other times. In the winter people had to travel in sleighs or pungs and if the day was real cold they had to dress pretty warm to keep from freezing. Unless you had hot bricks or something like that to keep your feet warm it was like sitting with them on a cake of ice.

4

The French Canadians that came to Maine about the time I did, didn't come from any special section of Canada: they came from all parts of it. I guess, though, that the most of them came from Quebec. Quite a few came from Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edwards Island, and the province of Ontario. The people from New Brunswick Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island could generally speak English pretty well, but you could tell they came from Canada by the way they talked. It used to be an awful insult to call anybody a P I.

There were different reason why they left, I suppose. When a person leaves one place and goes to another, the main reason why he leaves is because he wasn't satisfied in the first place, and he thinks he can better himself by going somewhere else. I know a lot of people up there were hard up. They thought times were better in the states, and I guess they were. Some of the farmers thought they could do better farther south (in Maine) where the growing season would be a little longer. Some of the young fellows, like myself, couldn't see much future for themselves on a small village farm where there were a lot of kids growing up. Some of them wanted a change, or they wanted to see a little of the world. The ones that left were generally of the poorer classes, and they thought they could better across the line.

5

In early days there were no restrictions whatever on immigration; that is, there were no laws or regulations to prevent any one from coming to the states from Canada. There may have been family objections in a few cases, but they were seldome serious. The greatest obstacle was generally a lack of the necessary cash. Some of those that left were fortunate enough to have relatives here that they could stay with until they found work. I think the first immigration laws were passed soon after the Aroostook War, but for a long time they weren't strictly enforced. The laws have been changed from time to time and a head tax has been added.* The laws are strictly enforced now and the quota can't be exceeded.

I left Kouchidouduac in the spring of 1896 when I was twenty year old. My folks were in the fifties then. They didn't exactly like to see me leaving, but I had some brothers of near my own age who could carry on the work of the farm. My father said that maybe I could better myself, but that if I couldn't, I could alwas come back to the farm.

* Mr. Arthur LeBlanc, 50, a grocer who lives at 45 Carrol Street, Old Town, says that when he came from Canada in 1919, he paid a head tax of $8.00.

They sold fruit, sandwiches, and candy on the train, but I didn't buy any for I had a little lunch wrapped up in a newspaper that I had brought from home. The trains then ran along pretty fast as they do now. It takes about seven hours to go from St. John, New Brunswick, to Bangor these days, and they used to make the trip in about eight hours fifty years ago. The Railroads charge two cents a mile now, but when I came here the fare was between three and four cents for that distance. People going on trips then could save a fraction of a cent on a mile by getting a mileage book. These books had little tickets in them: If you travelled fifty miles miles the conductor tore out fifty tickets. They were supposed to be non-transferable, but brokers handled them and you could get a book, or part of one, use as much mileage as you needed, and return the book to the broker. Pawnshops sold them, too, with various amounts of mileage left in them. The tickets were no good if they

were detached, and the conductor always took the covers when the last ticket was used. Brokers stopped handling them about twenty five years age when fares were reduced so that there was no profit for them in selling mileage.

7

I had earned enough swamping in the woods the winter before to pay my fare to Greenville and leave me about thirty dollars over.

I din't feel so bad when I left home, but when I got to Greenville that night and found myself among strangers, I felt pretty homesick. I worked in Greenville for about three months and then went to Waterville where some cousins of mine lived. For the next five years I worked in Waterville except in the winters when I went up in the woods near Greenville to work. In 1901, when I was twenty-five years old,' I came to Old Town, where I've been ever since.

The French Canadians who come to Maine either go to some town where they have relatives, or they start for some place where they think they can get the kind of work they can do. The towns that have large French populations are pretty well known, and they naturally attract the most immigrants.

Maine, or the States, was the logical place for any one in eastern Canada to came to if they were looking for a better place to live. It was no use going farther north, nobody wanted to cross the ocean to go to some foreign country, and western Canada wouldn't have been much of an improvement over the eastern part. Just how many came over in any of the last fifty years would be hard to say. Maybe the immigration people could tell you. Only a certain number are allowed to come in every year, and I guess there is always a waiting list.

8

There weren't many went back to Canada, summer or winter once they got here, I can tell you that. Some of them may have gone back because they got discouraged or homesick,

but they were exceptions. The majority of the people who come here intend to stay. They like to go up on vacations sometimes, but those trips are usually taken in the summer months. When Father Trudell (a former pastor of St. Josephs Church) was alive he used to run excursions every year to St. Anne de Beaupre, and a lot of French people went up on those. I never went up on one of those, but they say a lot of people get cured up there. I've heard there is a big pile of crutches just inside the door where they were thrown by people who didn't need them any more.

9

The average age of people who came over would be hard to say, but I think it would be in the early twenties. More men came over than women. The women were generally unmarried, and they usually found jobs in hotels or in private families, unless they had some special skill. Some of them that had experience in textile mills or shoe factories, got work along those lines. I know a lot of whole families came over. Look at the Morins. They came to Old Town about the time I came to Greenville. Including the old folks there were about twenty-five in the family, and about all they had was the clothes they were wearing. They tell me Frank used to go around barefoot because he didn't have any shoes to wear. Frank and Lawrence started a little fruit business in a tent about where the Morin store is now. Lawrence was pretty shrewd and Frank was well liked. He was real polite and he made the customers feel that he was tickled to death to see them whether they had only one cent to spend or a couple of dollars. He always managed to look clean and prosperous even when he was getting started. Before the chain stores came to town the Morins had a regular monoply of the fruit and confectionery business in Old Town. They did a wholesale and retail business. A few years ago they were rated among the richest people in town, and for a long time Frank was called the best dressed man in Old Town - I guess he is yet. Lawrence is dead now and Frank has sold out and gone into the real estate business. People say the fruit business wont last long now because nobody likes

the boys - they're too snobish. I guess the way to get ahead is to have a lot of people going around telling what a good fellow you are. I wish I'd known that fifty years ago.